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STATE FOR EUR/WE, EUR/RPM, WHA/AND, WHA/BSC

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SUBJECT: SPANISH CONGRESS' FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CHAIR
ON U.S.-SPAIN RELATIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathleen M. Fitzpatrick,
reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Rafael Estrella, Socialist spokesperson on Congress's Foreign Affairs Committee (committee chairman equivalent) told us that he believes relations have "completely normalized" between the U.S. and Spain. According to Estrella, Spain's engagement with Venezuela should not pose an obstacle to improving U.S.-Spain relations because Spain and the U.S. share the same goals on Venezuela, and differ only in strategy. On NATO caveats, Estrella believed it would be much easier for Spain to dispense with NATO command structure billet caveats than with caveats on its troops' participation in ISAF. Estrella thought upcoming high-level meetings between U.S. and Spanish officials would be very helpful for countries' relations, but was disappointed Foreign Minister Moratinos could not meet with National Security Advisor Hadley, because direct communication between the Zapatero government and the White House was key. End summary.

"Normalized" Relations?

2. (C) After remarking that he felt relations between the U.S. and Spain had normalized, Estrella said he was personally very happy that President Zapatero met with Deputy Secretary Zoellick for nearly two hours in Madrid April 2.

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Estrella stated that by meeting for so long, Zapatero was sending a message that he believes relations with the U.S. are very important. Poloff cautioned Estrella that while U.S.-Spain relations had certainly improved, obstacles to further improvement remained, such as Spain's plans to sell military ships and planes to Venezuela.

Spain's Engagement with Venezuela

3. (C) On the Venezuela sale, Estrella said the Chavez government has assured Madrid that it will not use the hardware offensively. He added that none of the ships or planes will be outfitted with large guns or other armaments that would be typical for offensive operations. The Zapatero government's goal in Venezuela is to engage Chavez to give him a sense of security and "international belonging" that will deter him from adventures in the region. When asked why insecurity would cause Chavez to launch adventures in the region, Estrella said Chavez might feel the need to "keep the U.S. busy" with "little conflicts and problems all over Latin America," thus deflecting the U.S.'s focus from Venezuela to other areas in the region.

4. (C) Estrella emphasized that Spain, like the U.S., does not want Chavez to spread his populist ideology around Latin America. He believes Brazil's Lula wants to engage Chavez for the very same reason: Although Lula has a populist message, he doesn't have the Chavez government's oil money with which to ply the masses, and thus is concerned that Chavez' ideas and message may strike a chord in Brazil. Estrella also commented that Spain knows well that although Chavez claims he is a populist democrat now, if oil prices drop significantly, he could quickly turn into a "populist totalitarian." Nonetheless, the Zapatero government believes the U.S. and Spain share common goals in Venezuela and differ only in strategy. Spain believes Chavez can be contained best through engagement.

NATO Caveats

5. (C) On the question of NATO caveats, Estrella said that for Spain, NATO command structure caveats will be much easier to eliminate than caveats on ISAF participation in Afghanistan. The ISAF caveats allow the Spanish government

to maintain operational control over its troops and equipment, and it will be difficult, if not impossible for the government to relinquish operational control to a local commander. Estrella said he understood the problems presented by this arrangement for local commanders and unit agility and flexibility but said as a political question, the Zapatero government will have an extremely hard time giving up command of Spanish troops and equipment. On the other hand, Estrella said that he and many other Spanish government officials, including the military leadership, believe Spain and other NATO allies need to give up their caveats on NATO command structure billets. Although doing this for Iraq will be difficult, he believes Spain will eventually let go of NATO command structure caveats in general because the Zapatero government understands that NATO cannot function with an uncertain command structure mission to mission.

High-level Meetings

16. (C) Estrella believed meetings between Foreign Minister Moratinos and Secretary Rice, and Defense Minister Bono and Secretary Rumsfeld were key to continuing to improve

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relations between the U.S. and Spain, but was disappointed Moratinos would not be able to meet with National Security Advisor Hadley. Estrella said direct contact between the Zapatero government and the White House was very important.

Comment

17. (C) Estrella, a good Embassy contact, is one of the Socialists' more pro-U.S., pro-transatlantic relations officials, which partially explains his overly optimistic view that relations had "completely normalized." His remarks on Venezuela and the reasons for Spanish engagement there echoed what we have heard from numerous officials in the Zapatero administration. His disappointment that Moratinos could not meet with NSA Hadley is also something we have heard from other Socialists who, like Estrella, believe Spain has made enough positive gestures to warrant high-level meetings not just at the State and Defense Departments, but also at the White House.

MANZANARES